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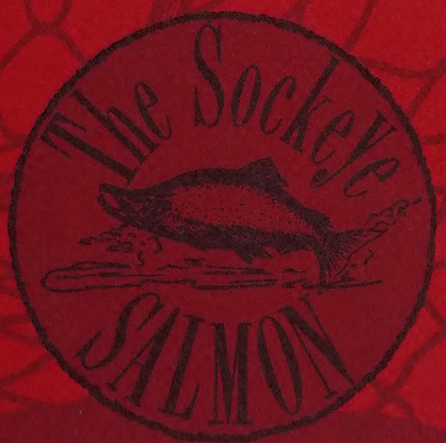
NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
NATIONAL MARINE FISHERIES SERVICE

ALASKA'S FISHERY RESOURCES



Fishery
Leaflet
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Alaska's Fishery Resources
The Sockeye Salmon

By

WILBUR L. HARTMAN

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Alaska's Fishery Resources — The Sockeye Salmon

By

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ABSTRACT

Sockeye salmon, Oncorhynchus nerka, are produced in river-lake systems in Canada, Alaska, and the Soviet Union. Alaska production has averaged $32 million to the wholesaler annually since 1945; the value was $72 million in 1965. Female sockeye salmon carry about 3,500 eggs and spawn in late fall in lake inlets and outlets and even the lakes themselves. The following spring, inch-long fry emerge and migrate at night to the lakes. After spending 1 to 4 years growing in the nursery lakes, the fish migrate in schools to the feeding grounds far out in the Pacific Ocean. After 1, 2, or 3 years at sea, the maturing sockeye salmon return through the coastal waters to the freshwater spawning grounds. Sockeye salmon when grown weigh 6 to 9 lb and average 24 inches long. They are captured by a Japanese high seas gill net fishery, an American inshore gill net fishery, and the Alaska native subsistence fishery in the rivers and lakes. The State of Alaska manages the inshore fishery. The National Marine Fisheries Service provides the basis for research needed for rational management and international protection of this valuable natural resource.

INTRODUCTION

The sockeye salmon, Oncorhynchus nerka, also known as the red salmon, is a renewable natural resource of prime economic importance to the State of Alaska. Its deep red flesh, rich in oils, makes the sockeye salmon the most highly prized of the five Pacific salmons for canning or smoking. Historically, the harvest of the commercial fishery for sockeye salmon has been measured by the number of cases of the canned product (48 1-lb cans per case). The greatest sustained abundance over a long period of time was between 1929 and 1938 when the annual harvest exceeded 2 million cases seven times. Between 1945 and 1967, the harvest ranged from a high of 1,945,000 cases in 1965 to a low of 487,000 in 1963 (table 1). The table also shows the wholesale value of the harvest. The record harvest in 1965 was worth $72.1 million--a value that increased many times before the canned product reached the housewife.

Sockeye salmon are produced in river-lake systems in Canada, Alaska, and the Soviet Union around the perimeter of the North Pacific Ocean. The eight major producing systems and the sizes of their annual catches are shown in figure 1. The most important system in Alaska is the Bristol Bay complex, which produces an annual average catch almost as large as the average yearly catch of the seven other systems combined (fig. 1).

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Table 1.--Number of cases and wholesale value of sockeye salmon caught in Alaska, 1945-67

Year[1]	Cases of salmon[2] (thousands)	Wholesale value (millions of dollars)
1945	1,173	$18.3
1946	1,065	22.9
1947	1,876	45.4
1948	1,635	45.0
1949	968	25.5
1950	1,166	34.2
1951	817	26.0
1952	1,181	33.8
1953	994	28.0
1954	804	23.2
1955	662	21.0
1956	1,016	34.9
1957	763	26.7
1958	488	16.5
1959	585	21.4
1960	1,166	39.7
1961	1,296	47.9
1962	755	27.9
1963	487	20.6
1964	715	29.3
1965	1,945	72.1
1966	1,237	46.2
1967	700	28.9
Average	1,021	$32.0

[1]The figures for 1945-63 are from the 1964 Pacific Fisherman Yearbook; landings 1964-67 from 1968 National Fisherman Yearbook issue; values 1964-67 from Alaska Department of Fish and Game Statistical Leaflets.

[2]A case of salmon contains 48 1-lb cans.

LIFE HISTORY

Sockeye salmon spend almost all of their life in fresh water. The adults spawn in late summer and autumn in the inlet and outlet rivers of lakes and in the lakes themselves. The eggs hatch in winter, and the young fry emerge from the spawning gravels and migrate to the lakes in the spring. The young salmon spend 1 to 4 years growing in the nursery lakes before they migrate to the feeding grounds far out in the North Pacific Ocean. After 1, 2, or 3 years at sea, maturing fish return in the spring to the coastal waters. Some are taken by commercial and subsistence fisheries, while the rest continue their journey to the rivers and lakes to produce the next generation. The life history of the sockeye salmon is pictured graphically in figure 2 and is compared with the life history of the other four Pacific salmons in table 2.

With this life cycle in mind, let us now consider some of the interesting details of the natural history of the sockeye salmon. Each spring millions of the adults leave their feeding grounds in the North Pacific Ocean and migrate hundreds of miles to return to the lake and stream spawning areas from which they emerged as tiny fry (about 1 inch long) a few years earlier. The navigational systems they use are still unknown, yet the unerring return to "home" river-lake systems and the constancy of timing of this return each year attests to some rather remarkable guidance mechanisms. Some scientists feel that on the high seas, salmon may be using a celestial object, such as the sun, as clocks and compass bearings, much as a sailor navigates with his sextant and chronometer. Scientists believe that as the adult salmon enter estuaries and near their natal spawning grounds, the sense of smell guides them to the home spawning area--the area whose combination of inorganic and organic odors most closely resembles that which the salmon experienced as eggs and young fry in the gravel.

Sockeye salmon reach the spawning stage at different ages. Most are 3, 4, 5, or 6 years old, but some may return to spawn at 2 years and others at 7. A sockeye salmon's age can be determined from growth rings on its scales or on its ear bones, which are called otoliths. Mature sockeye salmon weigh an average of 6 lb and average 24 inches long (range 18 to 30 inches), but some exceed 10 lb.

Many things happen to the maturing sockeye salmon as they near fresh water. They stop feeding, and their digestive systems become nonfunctional and degenerate. From this point on, the spawning fish derive their nourishment from oils in their rich red flesh. The protein reserves in the flesh and skeletal structures and even the scales are drained. Other more evident changes take place: The fish lose their silvery ocean sheen, and the body becomes reddish and the head greenish; both sexes develop vicious-looking teeth, and the male's snout becomes very elongate and hooked. By spawning time the males are fire-engine red, and with their misshapen snouts (fig. 3) they display a grotesque but to some extent beautiful costume.

In Alaska the spawning season for sockeye salmon extends from late July to early October, depending on the location. Spawning occurs in inlet and outlet streams and along the gravel beaches of some lakes down to depths as great

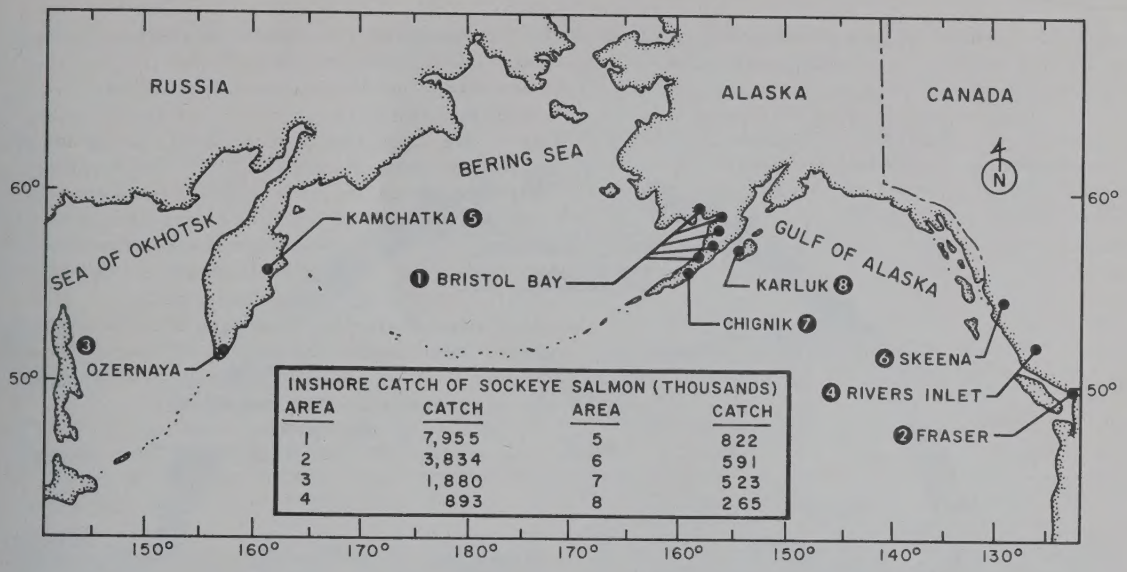

Figure 1.--Eight major sockeye salmon-producing systems of North America and Asia. Systems are ranked by number according to the size of their average annual catches in the years 1944-59, except for the catches of the Rivers Inlet system, which are for 1951-67.

as 100 ft. In most systems the amount of spawning in lakes is considerably less than in streams, but in Karluk and Iliamna Lakes, lake spawning is extensive in some years. In general, spawning coincides with water temperatures of 40° to 50° F, so that fish breeding in lakes or in their outlets spawn later than those in the streams because lake waters generally cool off more slowly in late summer than do runoff waters in lake tributaries. Early and late runs do not usually spawn in the same parts of the system.

Both sexes have stereotyped behavior patterns that lead to the spawning act and continue with defense of the nest until the death of the adults. A spawning pair (fig. 4) occupy a territory which they vigorously defend against invasions by other spawning sockeye salmon--the male bluffing or fighting off other males and the female defending against other females. During this time the female, and the male to some extent, digs a depression in the gravel by lying on her side and stirring the gravel with rapid and powerful strokes of her tail. The dislodged gravel is swept downstream, and soon a pit up to 10 to 16 inches deep is excavated. At the time of spawning the female settles into the pit, and the male approaches her very closely. The eggs and milt are released into the pit simultaneously. The eggs lack buoyancy and are slightly adhesive for a few minutes, and most of them sink into crevices between the uncovered stones. Immediately after she spawns the female digs in the gravel upstream from the pit, and the water current carries some of this gravel downstream to cover the fertilized eggs. Each female spawns three to five times, constructing a new pit in the gravel each time. This disturbed area of gravel is called the redd. After her eggs are deposited, the female defends the redd area; the male may also defend it or may move on to spawn with another female. The male and female both die several days after spawning, and their bodies drift downstream and lodge on the banks of the stream (fig. 5).

The redds where the eggs are deposited may include fine and coarse gravel and even stones 3 to 6 inches in diameter. Some sockeye salmon, in fact, spawn among rocks so large that they cannot be moved by digging. The spawning sites are usually selected where there is good waterflow through the gravel for the eggs, which hatch and develop during winter or early spring. The inch-long fry remain in the gravel for several weeks living on the nourishment in their attached yolk sacs. During this time they are very active and may move around in the spaces between the stones. Eventually they move up out of the gravel and begin their free life, sometime during the period of April through June.

After the fry emerge in lake tribuaries, they move downstream into the lake; those hatched in lake outlets must move upstream into the

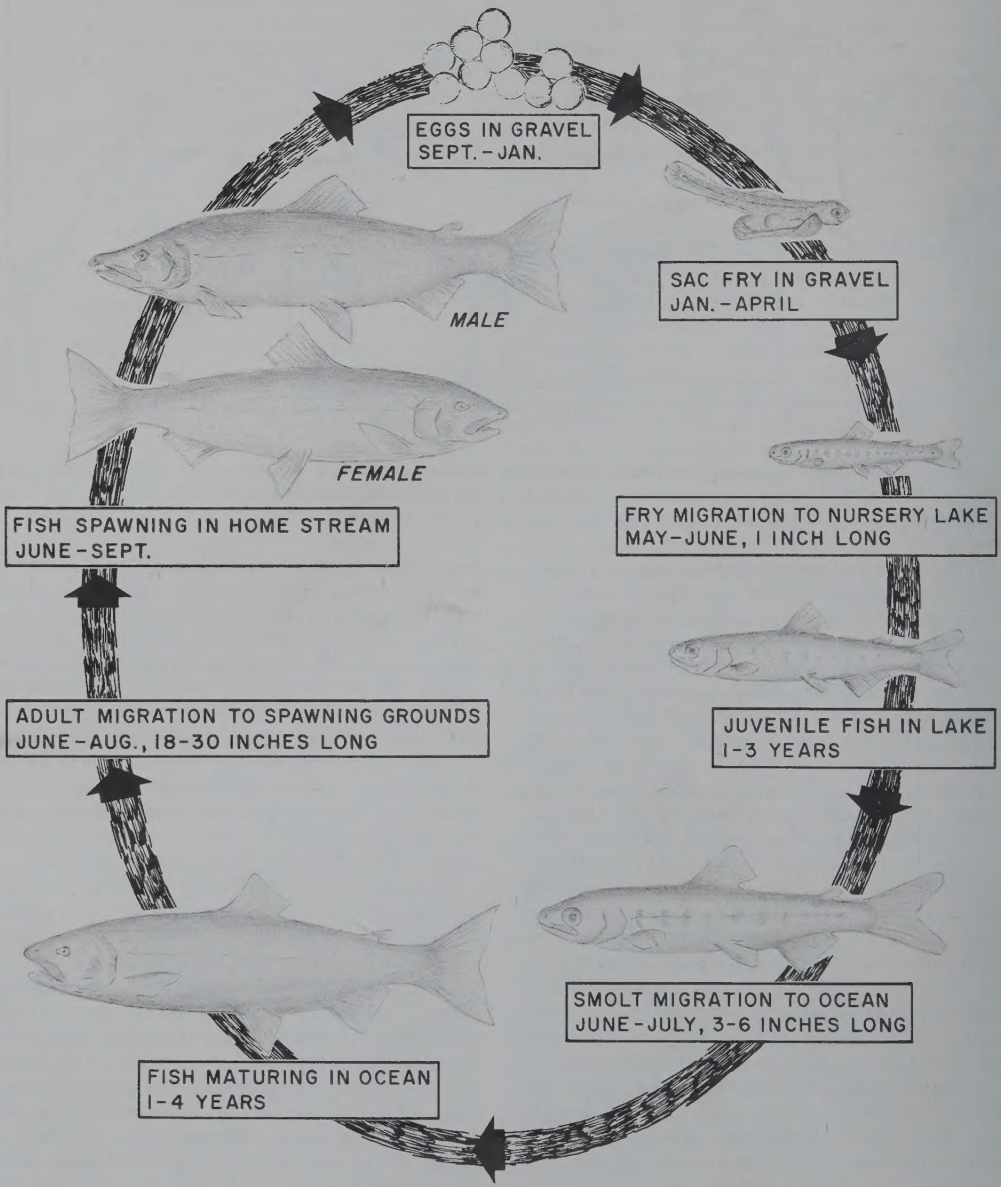

Figure 2.--Life cycle of the sockeye salmon.

Table 2.--General life history features of the five species of Pacific salmon in Alaska. (Exceptions to these general descriptions occur frequently)

Species of salmon	Freshwater habitat	Time spent in fresh water after emergence from gravel	Time spent at sea (years)	Year of life at spawning	Average weight of adults[1] (lb)	Average eggs per female (thousands)
Sockeye	Short streams and lakes	12-48 months	1-3	3-6	6	3.5
Pink	Short streams	Usually less than 1 day	1	2	4	2.0
Chum	Short and long streams	Less than 1 month	2-4	3-5	8	3.0
Coho	Short streams	12-24 months	1-1/2	3-4	9	3.5
Chinook	Large rivers	3-12 months	1-4	3-6	20	4.0

[1]Weight of whole or round fish. Source: Int. N. Pac. Fish. Comm., Bull. 12, p. 48.

Figure 3.--Severely hooked jaws of a spawning male sockeye salmon. Males are vicious defenders of their nesting areas.

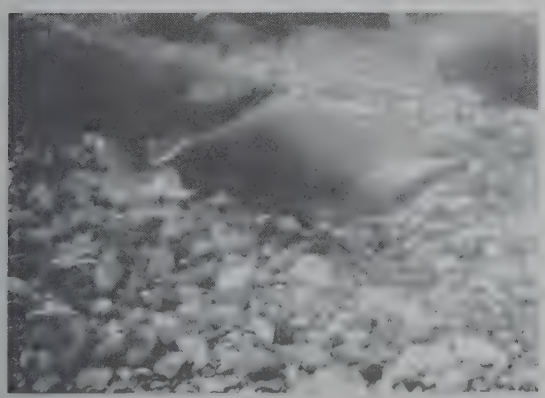

Figure 4.--Pair of sockeye salmon on spawning redd.

Figure 5.--Decomposed and dried carcasses of sockeye salmon on a beach below a spawning stream.

lake. They migrate singly during the darkest hours of the night, thus minimizing the dangers of predation by char, sculpins, trout, and birds. Once in the lakes the fry move about in schools and feed on minute plants and animals (fig. 6). During this part of their life cycle the young sockeye salmon eat many of the same foods as sticklebacks, whitefish, and other small fish. They are preyed upon by larger fish, such as lake trout and Arctic char, and birds, such as mergansers. Their lake residency may be as short as 1 year or as long as 4.

When they leave the lake the young sockeye salmon, now called smolts, are ready for their life at sea. The smolts, like the fry, migrate rapidly downstream, usually during the darkest hours of the night. Driven and guided by as yet

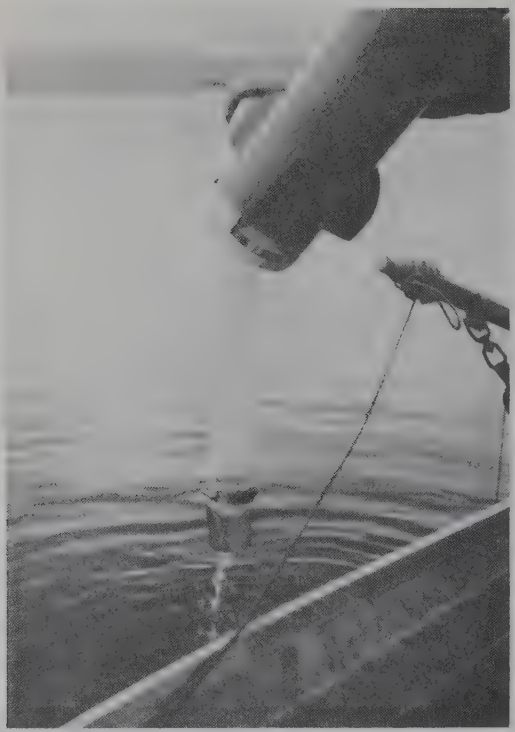

Figure 6.--A net such as this is towed in the nursery lakes to sample the microscopic plants and animals that constitute the diet of juvenile sockeye salmon.

unknown forces, they migrate out through the estuaries and disappear into the Pacific Ocean. They are 3 to 6 inches long and have silvery bodies with green backs (fig. 7). They first feed mainly on minute crustaceans, but as they grow larger they gradually shift to squid, shrimp, and small fish. The size of the sockeye salmon at the approach of sexual maturation and the start of the migration to the "home" spawning grounds depend on the genetic makeup of the stocks, the length of ocean life, and the distance of the migration to the spawning grounds. The migration timing is probably related to the seasonal temperature conditions of the spawning grounds and must influence the size of the sockeye salmon by controlling the amount of ocean growth in the final ocean year.

Certain populations of sockeye salmon become landlocked in lake systems. These fish, called kokanee, survive by adapting their entire life cycle to fresh water. They do not leave the lakes as smolts but rather grow and mature in

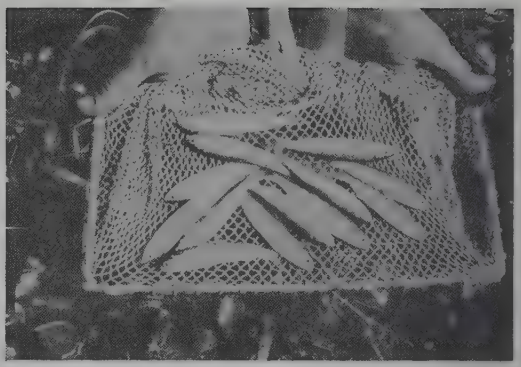

Figure 7.--Sockeye salmon smolts, 4 to 6 inches long, are sampled on their migration to sea.

the lakes until the time of spawning. Although kokanee are not usually younger than sockeye salmon at the time of spawning, they are considerably smaller, often less than 14 inches long, because they have not grazed on the lush pastures of food in the ocean. Like the sea-run sockeye salmon, kokanee all die after spawning.

With the migration of Alaska adult sockeye salmon from the ocean feeding grounds to the spawning grounds, we have come full circle in their life cycle. Many of the salmon will be harvested by (1) a Japanese high seas fishery, (2) the American inshore gill net fishery, or (3) the Alaska native subsistence fishery in the rivers and lakes. Those escaping these various fisheries will enter their home streams to spawn and propagate the species.

MANAGEMENT OF THE FISHERY AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Conservation of the sockeye salmon resource in terms of wise use requires rational management of the fishery and of the sockeye salmon-producing systems themselves. Since Statehood in 1959, the State of Alaska has assumed responsibility for regulating the fishery. The National Marine Fisheries Service continues to provide the scientific research basic to rational management of the fishery. Because of international complications during the past 15 years (brought on by the exploitation of the resource by a Japanese high seas gill net fishery), the Service shares with the State the responsibility of preserving the resource and safeguarding the rights of U.S. fishermen through international treaties and negotiations. Each year as the adult sockeye salmon leave the ocean and head

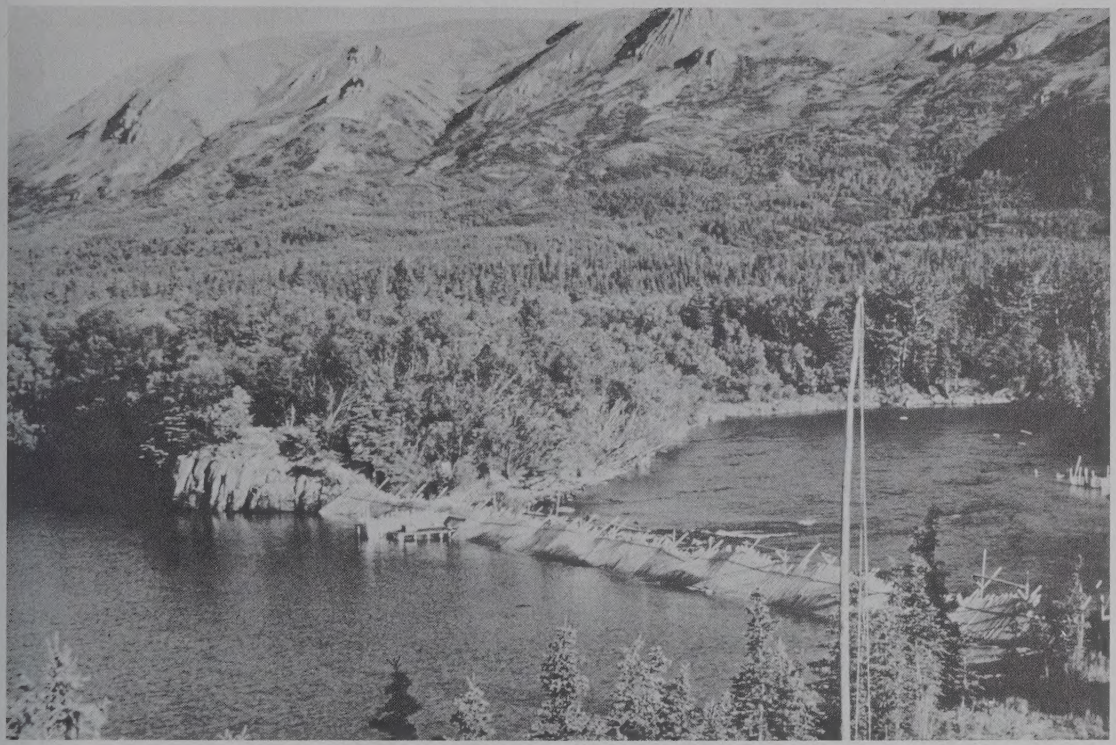

Figure 8.--Fences like this one at Brooks Lake, Alaska, are used to sample and count the migration of adult sockeye salmon to certain spawning grounds each year.

toward the coastal waters to spawn, the fishery managers face the difficult task of allowing a maximum yield to the fishery while permitting enough fish to escape to the spawning grounds to perpetuate future generations. Management and research efforts by the State and the Service must provide the information needed to determine the strength of the runs and to control the many factors that bear on production and survival.

A great many vital statistics are gathered to answer such questions as: How many sockeye salmon were caught in each fishing district? How many escaped to various spawning grounds (fig. 8)? What were their ages? How many eggs were successfully buried in the spawning gravels? What was the survival of these eggs to hatching? How many young sockeye salmon left the nursery lakes this spring? How old and what size were they? What is the average marine survival until the adults return to the fishery? How big will next year's run of adults to the fishery and the spawning grounds be?

To supplement these statistical data, biological and environmental information is gathered to answer such questions as: How many sockeye salmon can spawn in a certain area without its being overcrowded? How much oxygen in the water do eggs need for embryological development? How much sand and silt in the spawning gravels will suffocate eggs? What fish prey on sockeye salmon fry and how extensively? What do young sockeye salmon eat in the nursery lakes, and what factors influence the richness of this food supply? When do sockeye salmon leave for the ocean, and what are the hazards along the way?

Let us look now at a typical survival schedule for Alaska sockeye salmon. Of the 4,000 eggs carried by a spawning female, only about 400 ever survive the spawning losses, the freezing gravels and disease during incubation, and the predation during their migration as fry to the lakes. Only about 32 of these survive to leave the nursery lakes as smolts. Of these, only six survive ocean hazards to return to the inshore fisheries; from these six, at least one male and one female (carrying 4,000 eggs) must be per-

mitted to escape and spawn to start the next generation. This survival schedule leaves an average of only three adults from the original 4,000 eggs available to the fishery. Any catch greater than three of every six fish could short-change the escapement, to the detriment of future production. Survival schedules deviate, of course, from this typical one. We must learn the survival schedule of each major population so that fishery managers will have continually improved guidelines for proportioning the sockeye salmon between the fishery and the spawning grounds.

In addition to assuring optimum escapements to the spawning grounds, the fishery manager has other means of maximizing freshwater production. New spawning grounds can be made available to salmon by removing or bypassing natural or artificial barriers to migration. Hatcheries and seminatural spawning channels can augment fry production materially. Sands and silts that suffocate eggs can be cleansed from valuable spawning grounds. Predator or competitor fish can be removed in small lakes. And spawning adults, eggs, or fry can be transplanted to strengthen old populations or establish new ones.

In conclusion, the sockeye salmon of Alaska is a tremendously valuable protein resource and an economic benefit to the nation. The salmon, however, continually face such hazards as overfishing, dams along the migration routes, siltation of the spawning gravels, and pollution of the rearing areas, plus all the natural physical, chemical, and biological hazards of each environment. Only continued and increased support of the fishery managers and the research scientists will result in wise and maximum use of this resource.

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This is the fourth in a series of Fishery Leaflets that describe the fishery resources of Alaska. Other Leaflets and the species described are:

No. 619--The Pink Salmon

No. 631--The Shrimps

No. 632--The Chum Salmon

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